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Decline of honeybees is conference topic

By John Raby
Associated Press

CHARLESTON, W.Va. — The buzz around Marshall University this week will be about the importance of honeybees.

About 300 beekeepers were expected to join 12 vendors and dozens more presenters at the Heartland Apiculture Society's annual conference starting Thursday in Huntington, W.Va.

Speakers will educate conference visitors about bees and stress their importance at a time when honeybee populations continue to decline, farmers face increased production costs and consumers could ultimately have to pay more for produce.

"People really have become very much aware of the importance of the honeybee in the last two to three years and the problems we may face if we don't bring them back," said Gabe Blatt of Huntington, president of the Heartland Apiculture Society.

"About one out of every three bites of food that we eat are a direct result of pollination," Blatt said. "If that goes away, we've got a problem. And people are beginning to realize that."

Nationally, the number of honey-producing colonies has dropped from 5 million in the 1940s to 2.5 million now, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

In 2006, beekeepers began reporting losing 30 percent to 90 percent of their hives. This phenomenon has become known as Colony Collapse Disorder.

Beekeepers have lost 36 percent of their managed colonies this year. It was 31 percent for 2007, according to the Agriculture Department's Agricultural Research Service.

There are many reasons, including drought and the arrival of two parasitic mites in the United States starting in the mid-1980s, Blatt said.

Many fruits and vegetables require the work of honeybees. Blueberries, cranberries, tomatoes, apples, pears, apricots and almonds, for example, require the work of pollination.

Ice cream maker Haagen-Dazs is among the companies that have pledged money for research and begun efforts to help save the bees. The problem affects about 40 percent of Haagen-Dazs' 73 flavors, including banana split and chocolate peanut butter, because ingredients such as almonds, cherries and strawberries rely on honeybees for pollination.

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